

We're talking about Christmas in a sermon series called Christmas classified. We have four Sundays and then Christmas Eve to talk about five characteristics of the Christmas story.

We began the series last week with **promise**. In their advanced age Elizabeth and Zechariah were promised a child, who turned out to be John the Baptist. Joseph and Mary each received God's promise that they would be parents of a child who would change the world – his name was Jesus. And before those people lived, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote powerfully of God's promise to deliver a child who would announce God's salvation. So promise is an essential characteristic of the Christmas story, especially when we realize God always keeps promises.

The characteristic of Christmas we talk about today is deeply connected the promises of God: **Hope**. We all know what hope is, but Christmas hope needs some additional explanation.

What do we hope for? Good weather. Safe travels. We say to people, hope you have a merry Christmas! Or hope you get the job you interviewed for.

Often, hope is a desire for an outcome. Here's the way I want the future to unfold for you, for myself, for the world. And I express that desire as my hope.

Christmas hope is more than that. It IS that – a desire for an outcome – but it is more than that. To understand the more that Christmas hope is we have to understand the fundamental nature of hope: Hope is always about the not yet. Here in 2014, we don't hope for the year 1977, do we? 1977 has come and gone. Hoping for something that already is or already has been makes no sense. I no longer hope you show up for worship today. You're here... well at least most of you are here – some of you are not all here. I don't have to hope for your presence. Hope is about the not yet.

But there's more to it. Hope at Christmas is something that can't be understood unless we have experienced its absence, what we call hopelessness.

You know how they say you don't know how lucky you are to have food on your table until you go hungry? My mom was fond of saying you don't know how valuable your health is until you lose it. In general, we don't really understand the significance of what we have until we don't have it. It's that way with hope.

If you have what you need and some of what you want, if your life is basically in order, you're basically satisfied with the status of your life, you may not fully understand Christmas hope because Christmas hope is about our deepest and most painful longings; it's about our hopelessness, not over the Christmas present we really, really want but aren't going to get (Oh! I don't think I'm going to get that BMW! It's hopeless!) but over the underlying character and quality of our lives.

Christmas hope addresses a hunger of the soul, not of the wish list. I may not be able to go the Bahamas this year! Oh no! My life does not have meaning anymore! That's not Christmas hope.

One of Neil Diamond's best songs – so I think – is “I Am I Said.” One line in that song describes a part of life to which Christmas hope responds: “I've got an emptiness deep inside and I've tried but it won't let me go. Now I'm not man who likes to swear, but I've never cared for the sound of being alone.”

Hear that? Emptiness. Loneliness. Profound loss in the soul.

In ancient Israel people waited for a messiah. For them, the messiah was to be the person who would lead Israel back to its former greatness, who would cast out foreign occupying nations. When the shepherds out in the fields heard from the angels that the messiah had been born in Bethlehem, they ran to the city. Maybe for the first time in their lives they had hope about the future of their homeland. Little did they know as they ran, that the child they were running to see would change the course of human history forever.

Christmas hope is not about your wish list; it's about your heart list. What are you hopeless about? What does your heart ache for but just can't find, and fears you may never find? What might these people feel hopeless about? I assume you recognize the images – from protests in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City. Don't get partisan here. You may disagree with their issues – and that's your right – but for the moment put yourself in their place; see the world through their eyes.

They see a country where it's more dangerous to walk around with dark skin than it is to walk around with my skin. You may agree or disagree with them, that's your right; I'm not here to argue with you. But moms who tearfully say my son's more likely to die than your son only because he's got a different color to his skin, often speak from a well of hopelessness and despair that things aren't going to change.

Sixty years after Brown v Board of Education, fifty years after the civil rights act, and things are no better than this?! Why should we believe they will ever change? That can feel hopeless.

I ask again, what's your hopelessness? Could be financial. Could be familial. I'm hopeless about my three siblings and I ever being one close knit group again. Three of us are. All four of us? No way.

What's your hopelessness?

When the wisemen saw the star, they followed because they believed it would lead them to the new born king of the Jews, which was an answer to their hopelessness. What hopelessness do you need an answer to?

Unless you know hopelessness, Christmas hope is just another seasonal tradition, and you can come and go to church in December without much care. But if you can name your emptiness – your hurts that won't heal, your relationships that won't mend, your fears that won't subside, your stress that won't relent – if you can identify your hopelessness, then Christmas hope is a blessing that will change your world. Because Christmas hope is that God is about to make an appearance in your life. Hear the wording of that: God is about to make – the not yet – an appearance in your life.

To close we're going to read a Bible passage. You might expect me to read from one of the Gospels. But not today. We're going to an Old Testament book, **Lamentations**. Find it right after the prophet Jeremiah. As you will hear, this writer believes God is against him – now THAT'S hopelessness! Listen **(3.1-20)**.... But that's not the last word. **Vv. b 21-26**....

Christmas hope is that your salvation is coming. God is coming to save you from your hopelessness in a baby named Jesus.